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# Poles' in Germany engagement in immigrant organizations and its determinants

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Using the example of engagement of Poles in Germany in Polish immigrant organizations (PIOs), the article gives an insight into the problem of immigrants' social activity. Based on quantitative and qualitative sources, the analysis shows a low level of involvement in PIOs. That lack of engagement seems to be influenced by factors such as: general activist attitude, reluctance to long lasting involvement, focus on everyday life, especially work and cultural bonds with Polish society – the weak tradition of civil society and self-organization.

*Keywords: Migration, social activity, social engagement, immigrant organizations*

Polish immigrants in Germany are one of the biggest immigrant minorities in this country<sup>1</sup>. Despite their number, Poles do not often attract attention of either researchers or policymakers. They are often described as “invisible” (Schmidtke, 2004; Loew, 2014). There may be several causes of that “invisibility”. They are often perceived as migrants that integrate relatively easy, do not cause serious problems, or do not differ from the dominant receiving society. On the other hand, their invisibility may be interpreted as a result of lack of activity, including low level of engagement in immigrant organizations.

Social activity of migrants at first sight seems to be quite well researched. However, a closer look reveals that most of the research

<sup>1</sup> Poles and people with Polish roots are constituting 9,9% of all people with migrant background. They are the second immigrant group after Turks (16,7%) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2017: 7).

somehow focuses on several selected subjects, leaving other fields reality unresearched. One of such well-researched subjects is the political activity of migrants understood as involvement in the political system. Migration researchers often pay attention to issues like participation in the political system of the sending country (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Nell, 2004), and their involvement in the host country political system. They usually analyse elections (Tam Cho, 2009; Tillie, 1998), but apart from that they focus on issues like the political mobilization of migrants (Nagel and Olzak, 1992) and the conditions for political incorporation of immigrants (Gidengil and Stolle, 2009; Klopp, 2002). The other subject that seems to be drawing attention of researchers is the self-organization of immigrants, however, most of the studies in this topic is rooted in institutional approach (Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005; Vermeulen, 2006; Moya, 2005; Priestly, 1996; Hung, 2007). Relatively few studies deal with issues related to immigrants' engagement in the activities of immigrant organizations (Schoeneberg, 1985; Cyrus, 2005; Gandziarowska, 2005; Nowosielski, 2014).

The aim of the article is to contribute to the development of that research subject by analysing Polish immigrants in Germany's engagement in immigrant organizations. Apart from that the text aims at examining conditions that may exert influence on the participation of immigrants in Polish immigrant organizations (PIOs) in Germany.

The article is organized as follows. The first, basic information about Polish migration to Germany is presented in order to give the background for further analyses. Second, there is information about sources of data used in the article demonstrated. The third part of the article is the analysis of the level of Poles engagement in PIOs in Germany in comparison with other countries. In the fourth part potential factors influencing social acidity of Poles in Germany will be examined with the use of quantitative as well as quantitative data.

## **Polish migration to Germany**

Germany has traditionally been an important migration destination for Poles – regular migrations from Poland to Germany are considered to have been going on for around 200 years (Nowosielski, 2016).

The first – relatively insignificant – migration movements in the early 19th century were connected with political refugees to some German states (e.g. Saxony) (Janusz, 2001: 12). However, a particularly large and noteworthy migration wave lasted from about 1870 to 1914 and was associated with the processes of industrialization

and rapid economic development of Germany, hence, increased the demand for labour. It is estimated that around 3.5 million people moved from the Polish territories into the German Empire<sup>2</sup> during that period (Galos, 1981: 31-35).

In the interwar period, in principle, permanent migration was limited as was seasonal one. Despite that, Polish economic immigrants constantly came to Germany (Kępińska, 2008). An important phenomenon was the forced migration during the Second World War which constituted a part of German Nazi population and labour-force policy. It is estimated that about 1.9 to 2.5 million forced labourers, prisoners of German concentration camps, stalags and oflags, as well as children deported for Germanization purposes, were resettled from Polish territories (Łuczak, 1984). After the war, most of them left Germany but it is estimated that in 1950 there were about 80,000 so-called Dipis, or displaced persons who had decided to stay in Germany (Janusz, 1990).

After the Second World War, several migration waves were observed – some of them specific to Germany, others similar to those of other European countries. The former were associated with the resettlement of the German population from Poland (Trzecielińska-Polus, 1997). Three basic periods were observed: the first in the 1950s, when about 250,000 so called *Aussiedlers* (resettlers) left Poland, the second in the 1970s – approx. 130,000 people, and the third, with the largest, amounting to about 800,000 people, wave of migrants. This last wave is the most interesting from the point of view of this paper due to the fact that many of those people kept close links with Polish culture and language (Schmidt, 2009). An important migration wave was also political and economic migration from the 1980s – also known as “Solidarity migration” (Wrzesiński, 2000). Its number – depending on the source – could range from 150,000 to 850,000 people (Nowosielski, 2016).

In the 1990s, Germany was a popular economic migration destination for Poles. The size of this migration wave is estimated at over 200,000<sup>3</sup>. (Nowosielski, 2016). Due to the closure of the German labour market before the Poles after the Polish accession to the EU, the influx of migrants after 2004 was not very dynamic, it increased – though not dramatically, after 2011, when Germany finally opened its labour market for Poles (GUS).

<sup>2</sup> Some of these migrations were in fact internal migrations, from territories of the Prussian partition.

<sup>3</sup> Many cases from this wave were seasonal or circular migrations.

The number of Poles or migrants from Poland in Germany is difficult to estimate. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs estimates it at the level of about 2 million (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014: 172). More detailed data is provided by the findings of the German Mikrocensus study yielding information about people with so-called “migration background” (*Migrationshintergrund*). It is estimated that in 2016 there were 1,868 thousand Poles or people who have Polish migration background in Germany, of whom 1 468 thousand people were migrants in the first generation. The category includes 201 thousand Poles naturalized in Germany and 783 thousand Polish citizens (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2017: 82-100). The remaining less than 500 thousand people are *Aussiedler*.

## Data

The empirical basis for the quantitative analyses are the results of the research conducted within the project *Polish diaspora policy in practice*, financed by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of *Plan for the cooperation with the Polish diaspora and Poles abroad in 2013*. The study used the survey method employing the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviews) research technique engaging a sample of 3500 people in the selected countries: Ireland, Great Britain, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Belgium, France, Germany, Austria and the USA. The researched group of Poles in Germany amounted to 794 people. It must be kept in mind, though, that due to the nature of the research methods used and the sampling scheme, the results of the study are not representative. That means that they cannot be generalized with reference to the whole population of Polish immigrants; they only concern the group which uses selected Polish websites while living abroad. However, that was the only method of reaching such a high number of respondents (Polish emigrants) in such a short time.

The qualitative data used in this article came from the following sources: in-depth interviews with leaders of Polish immigrant organizations collected during the research project *Polish NGOs in Germany* conducted in 2008. The interview codes from this research phase start with the Roman number I. Apart from that in-depth interviews with Polish immigrant organizations’ leaders, experts as well as not engaged Poles in Germany conducted during the research project *Poles in Germany: Social, political, economic and le-*

*gal aspects* conducted in the years 2010-2013. The interview codes from this research phase start with the Roman number II.

## Engagement in PIOs

Instead of posing a question on formal membership in PIOs we asked Polish migrants about their engagement in PIOs' activities in any form. That helped us to picture different forms of participation – not only formal but also informal ways of cooperation. Yet regardless of this strategy it turned out that that in general the level of Polish immigrants' involvement in PIOs is rather low.

The analysis of results reveals that in case of Poles in Germany only as many as 6,4% of the researched population engaged in any form in PIOs activities. The proportion is relatively low comparing it to all the selected countries – where 11,9% declared such engagement.

Table 1: Engagement of Polish migrants in PIOs' activities

	Poles in the Germany		Poles in selected European countries	
	Number	%	Number	%
Yes	51	6,4	418	11,9
No	240	30,2	1418	40,5

The range of Polish immigrants' involvement varies significantly depending on their county of residence. Nevertheless, the highest level of Poles involvement in Polish associations' activity occurs in countries such as: the USA (26,4%), France (18,8%), Sweden (18,5%). The lowest level of involvement may be observed in the surveyed group of emigrants in Belgium (3,8%), Italy (4,1%), Norway (6,3%). Poles involvement in Germany at the level of 6,4% also fall within the ambit of the same group. Statistical analysis shows that there is significant correlation between the engagement in Polish immigrant organizations and the country of residence ( $r = 0,239$ ).

Table 2: The country of residence and engagement in PIOs

Country of current residence		Engagement in activity of PIOs in country of current residence
the USA	Number	185
	%	26,4%
Ireland	Number	18
	%	8,3%
Great Britain	Number	92
	%	9,4%
Norway	Number	5
	%	6,3%
the Netherlands	Number	15
	%	8,0%
Spain	Number	6
	%	6,9%
Sweden	Number	12
	%	18,5%
Italy	Number	7
	%	4,4%
Belgium	Number	3
	%	3,8%
France	Number	18
	%	18,8%
Germany	Number	51
	%	6,4%
Austria	Number	6
	%	10,7%
Total	Number	418
	%	11,9%

Test values

 $\chi^2 = 199,434^*$ 

Cramers' V = 0,239\*

\* p &lt; 0,01

Previous studies on the membership of immigrant organizations indicate that a wide range of engagement in different minority groups can be observed. For example Thomas Y. Owusu (2000), recalling his own and previous studies by Raymond Breton (1991) and Henry Radecki (1979), notes that the participation of immigrant associations among different immigrant groups in Canada ranges from 9% (Germany) to 12% (Chinese), 14% (Portuguese) up to 35% (Poles), 51% (Ukrainians) or 60% (Ghanians). Yet it should be noted that in the presented study, the question posed was on a fairly broad spectrum of engagement – not just pure membership. Comparing the results of the survey with the cited data, we may pose a statement that a relatively low percentage of Poles living abroad are involved in the activities of PIOs. In case of Poles in Germany this proportion is even lower than in the case of the most countries selected for the research.

The low level of involvement of Poles in Germany in the activities of PIOs may also be confirmed in qualitative data. The respondents – both leaders as well as experts – often noticed this problem, often comparing the high number of Poles in Germany with the low number of those who are socially engaged.

My calculation is like that: (...) In Germany there is approximately 1,5 million of Poles or people with Polish background. I recognize that we cover just 10-11 thousand. This is a small percentage. This is very little and it is a huge failure. (II D5)

Those organizations associate only small part of this community – of two million or up two million – that is the number which is mentioned. So in those organizations there is only small percentage. (II PP10)

When talking about low participation of Poles in Germany in organizations respondents often noticed that such a situation might have consequences for the state of PIOs.

Generally, there are no significant Polish community organisations in which there would be hundred, two hundred, five hundred or thousands of members. Such organisation don't exist. There are many organisations that have just a few members. (II D3)

The leaders of Polish organizations in Germany noticed that there seemed to be two different attitudes among Poles in Germany. One – extremely rare – is active, based on some kind of social ethos, often connected with the notion of peculiarity or even some kind of fanaticism.

Some may say: only fanatic people engage in organizations. This may be truth, but also people who have some kind of willingness to act for the society might also organize themselves (II D4)



Important thing is the activity of people and their determination. (...) If someone during his free time want to be socially engaged for the others, or rather not. And this is a base for social activity (II D6)

So I know some visionaries (...) they do simply what they want, what they love, because they love it, they are great activists. (I PKK2)

The other attitude – which is dominant – is passive, indifferent, characterized by lack of willingness to act together and engage.

I think that the biggest problem is inertia, some kind of inactivity or thoughtlessness. (...) When somebody treats something indifferently, this indifference is something worst, which leads to annihilation (II D4)

Social engagement of Poles is not satisfactory. I do not know where it comes from, but for sure one of the reasons is the fact that many of them does not want to be active. (II D5)

## **Factors influencing engagement in PIOs**

The low level of involvement of Polish emigrants prompts us to reflect on the determinants of the magnitude of this phenomenon. Earlier analyses – referring not only to Germany but also to other selected countries indicate that other experiences of social involvement might determine participation in the activities of PIOs.

First of all, the level of engagement in PIOs seems to be correlated with earlier experiences of social participation in Poland – namely participation in Polish NGOs.

In the population of Poles in Germany, among people who have experience of participation in the activities of non-governmental organizations in Poland, as much as 12.3% is involved in the work of PIOs, while people without similar experiences constitute only 5% of the surveyed population. The relationship between these variables was confirmed by the Chi-square test, the strength of the compound measured by the V-Cramer test is 0.118, which means that it is weak.

For the whole population of Poles living in selected countries, a similar relationship was observed. In the group of people who have previous experience of participation in NGO activities in their homeland, 21.2% are also involved in the activities of PIOs. For comparison, this percentage for people without similar experiences is only 9.8%. The relationship between these variables was confirmed by the Chi-square test, the relationship strength measured by the V-Cramer test is 0.136, which means that it is weak.

Table 3: Earlier involvement in NGOs and engagement in PIOs

Engagement in NGOs in Poland		Engagement in PIOs	
		Poles in the Germany	Poles in selected countries
Yes	Number	19	137
	%	12,3%	21,2%
No	Number	32	281
	%	5,0%	9,8%
Total	Number	51	418
	%	6,4%	11,9%
Test values		$\chi^2 = 11,119^*$ Cramers' V = 0,118*	$\chi^2 = 64,324^{**}$ Cramers' V = 0,136**

\* p &lt; 0,05

\*\* p &lt; 0,01

That relation is also present in the results of qualitative research. Polish migrants in Germany are strongly connected with Poland and they often perceive their habits or skills learned from their homeland as the basis of their behaviour. They look for similarities between their behaviours and typically Polish features.

The answer is short and true, we are a reflection of Polish society (...) we cannot be better or worse. We are from there. You could be one of us. (I MKK1)

It also applies to the sphere of social and political activity, where the researched Poles in Germany particularly often see deficiencies resulting from the lack of civic education or the tradition of social involvement. Their axionormative system internalized in Poland (in the case of numerous migrants, often under the rule of communists) seems to be a barrier to their greater involvement in the activities of PIOs.

This is historically based. Since 1926 we have been weaned to organize. Especially after 1945 all organizations were monopolized by the state and system that stood behind this state. And this brought distrust. Conviction that it is impossible to achieve anything acting in some kind of organized groups. (II C7)

Poles in general – especially our society, people of our age were very weak in getting politically involved, because (...) the politics was doomed to fail. In general it was told that there is no sense to engage in politics, and now we have it in our blood. (II D4)

It seems, therefore, that migrants seem to transfer their habits – also regarding social involvement from their homeland to the host country. However, they were additionally strengthened by the migratory experience.

I think, for example, a country where people are not engaged (...) and they leave, means they are not engaged, they are not interested, they are not active, they do not understand and so on... and they leave the country and they are not there either... there they are not even more interested, they do not understand, they do not get involved. (II PP1)

Involvement in PIOs' activity is also correlated with participation in nongovernmental sector of the receiving country. In this case, the association is even stronger. For the population of Poles living in the Germany, among the respondents, who take part in non-Polish NGOs' activities, a significant percentage of immigrants (29,9%) is also engaged in activities of PIOs. Among the persons who declare that they do not take part in NGOs' activity in country of residence, just 3,5% engages in PIOs. The relation was confirmed by the Chi-square test, its strength measured by the V-Cramer test is 0.336, which means that it is moderate.

Among the Poles in the selected countries, who engage in activities of the non-governmental sector in their country of residence, as much as 42% take also part in PIOs' activities. At the same time the percentage of Poles who are engaged in PIOs' activity in group of respondents but do not take part in the country of residence's NGOs' activities reaches much less – 7,2%. This relation was confirmed by the Chi-square test, the compound strength measured by the V-Cramer test is 0.369, which means that the relation is moderate.

Table 4: Involvement in non-Polish NGOs in country of residence and engagement in PIOs

Engagement in activity of non-Polish NGOs in country of residence		Engagement in PIOs	
		Poles in Germany	Poles in selected European countries
Yes	Number	26	201
	%	29,9%	42,0%
No	Number	25	217
	%	3,5%	7,2%
Total	Number	51	418
	%	6,4%	11,9%
Test values		$\chi^2 = 89,480^*$ Cramers' V = 0,336*	$\chi^2 = 475,542^*$ Cramers' V = 0,369*

\* p < 0,01

Regardless of the previously discussed variables related to previous social participation experiences, the qualitative research enables formulating an additional set of reasons for the weak involvement of the Polish community in Germany in the activities of PIOs.

One of such reasons often indicated by the organization's leaders is reluctance to be permanently bonded with the organization. Members of local communities willingly participate in various types of current actions or activities of the organization, but do not want to be its members.

People willingly come to help with event organization, but they don't want to be linked permanently. (I CK3)

Nowadays, people will help and will be involved in single actions, when you will ask them for help with event organization, e.g. charity concert, then someone will surely be happy to help you but they will not want to be permanently linked with the organization. (...) There are fewer and fewer such people, who would like to be involved. (II D2)

They are afraid. Today's people do not want to commit themselves to the fact that they will, for example, permanently operate in any organization, that they will pay fees and that they will be forced to come to the meeting (...) But if you cry: "listen, help me!" they will be happy to help you (I CK3)

Moreover, leaders of the researched organisations seek the reason for Poles' low level of engagement in their mercantilism. According to their opinion, voluntary, unpaid activity may seem unattractive for many of Poles living in Germany.

God forbid, to do something, to help, to be involved. To be quite honest with you, it's just about how to earn money, isn't that true? (I NL8)

Those people are focused on earning money here and spending it in Poland. (I CK3)

Because, in fact, there are a lot of Poles here (...). But there is no point of contact, apart from the events that they attend, they are not interested, because they are here for a specific purpose. Make up and that is it. (I RK5)

Some of the interviewees pointed that the reason for the lack of engagement of Poles in Germany might be a fact that they are focused more on everyday matters, like work and family. As a consequence they do not have time to get more socially engaged.

People are afraid of responsibility, because: «I have a job», because: «I have a family», because: «I'm walking like the horse in the treadmill». (I CK3)

They do not participate much, because they just have to survive. (I NON4)

In general, I'm that kind of person who doesn't do a lot besides the work. I work a lot and after work there is... There is no time, I would say. (II TK10)

## Conclusions

Taking the presented research findings into consideration one can state that the level of the involvement of Poles living in Germany in PIOs is rather low and amounts to not more than 6,4% of the whole population. It is not much even in comparison with the engagement of Poles living in other countries – where the medium level of involvement in PIOs activities is 11,9%.

There are several features that may have influence on the level of participation in PIOs. Quantitative data clearly show that the most important factor is some kind of an activist attitude which can be measured by previous experience of social participation in Poland as well as contemporary involvement in the third sector of the country of residence. Earlier experiences with NGOs in Poland make engagement in PIOs more likely. The proportion of those who were active in Poland and are active in Polish immigrant organizations is almost twice as high as in the case of the whole group of Poles in Germany. The influence of activist attitude is even more visible in the case of engagement in non-Polish NGOs in the country of residence – almost 30% of Poles who have such experiences are also involved in PIOs. The importance of such a proactive stance was also confirmed during quantitative studies. Leaders of PIOs often underlined that although such an attitude is crucial for organisations it is at the same time something unusual, odd, and outstanding.

The social activity of Poles in Germany seems also to be limited due to their reluctance to long lasting involvement. While some Poles are eager to use the services of the organization, or even to temporarily support the PIOs activities, they are hesitant to be bound with them for a longer period of time. Apart from that the common reason for low level of social involvement is the fact that everyday life, especially work and the need to acquire the resources needed for life, are too absorbing for Polish migrants.

Another very important factor determining the low level of social activity and engagement in PIOs is cultural bond with axionormative system of Polish society – namely its weak tradition of civil society and self-organization. The specific development path of the dominant type of social bond, religion, system and state in Poland influenced the process of shaping Polish civil society. The domination of *Gemeinschaft*-type ties, the strong influence of the Catholic Church, the long lasting experience of undemocratic regime of the state as well as traumatic historical events as partitions and the Second World War (especially the hecatomb of the Polish intelligentsia and the post-war processes of mass migrations) (Nowosielski, 2016: 267-270) – all that led to the undevelopment of civil society and domination of individualistic attitudes and unwillingness to engage in social organizations.

Poles in Germany, who have undergone socialization processes in Poland, transfer this internalized attitude to Germany, which has a negative impact on their needs for cooperation, activity and social participation, and in consequence also on the level of their social involvement in Germany. The leaders of Polish organizations in Germany emphasize their strong relationship with norms and traditions raised from Poland, and recognize that habits and experiences gained from Poland negatively affect the willingness of Poles living in Germany to participate in the activities of PIOs.

PIOs fail to attract attention and engagement of Polish migrants, they are also unable to effectively become part of this everyday life. Activist attitudes are rare and rather an exception than the rule. The consequence of low social involvement among Poles in Germany focused primarily on everyday problems, professional work and family life is the lack of mass organizations, and a kind of crisis of involvement.

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